The Logic of Spontaneity: A Reconsideration of Kerouac's "Spontaneous Prose Method"

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Jack Kerouac's "spontaneous prose method" is much misunderstood. Truman Capote gave the misunderstanding the most succinct expression when he referred to the method as mere "typing."[1] Capote used the term to disparage Kerouac's practice, fully realized first in *The Subterraneans,*[2] of working nonstop on a book until finished, refusing afterwards to revise his language. The "spontaneous prose method" is, for many critics and writers, Capote among them, merely a justification for mindless babbling and a disguise of one's laziness as "art."[3] But even those most disposed to enjoy Kerouac have felt qualms at the absoluteness with which he pursued his method. Seymour Krim, in an otherwise sympathetic essay, has reservations about what he calls the "funny lightness" of Kerouac's words:

> . . . they trip along like pony hoofs — no deep impression made on the page — with a kind of comic-strip simplification — everything impatiently kissed on the surface — but is experience only that

> which we can see right off? . . . [Kerouac's writing] can get dangerously close to verbal onanism rather than our inherited conception of fundamental novel-writing.[4]

How justified are Krim's suspicions and Capote's scorn? My own answer is that neither is justified; that, if Kerouac's attempts to explain his method, together with his application of the method to his writing, are examined carefully, the result will surprise us. For Kerouac will then begin to look, not only like a writer who understands his business, but like one who is able to dramatize that understanding. He plays the roles of teacher and student with his own experience as the main text, and he plays them with a dexterity and passion that deserve our respect.

Krim's suspicions to the contrary, nothing prohibits us from describing the "spontaneous prose method" as an "inherited conception." This conception is the ancient, almost commonplace, one by which certain forms of art, poetry in particular, are said to be inspired; they have a source outside the artist's conscious mind and express themselves through the artist, whereby the artist becomes the instrument of a higher intention. The conception is probably religious in origin and may be said to have been secularized first by Wordsworth, for whom poetry was "the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings." But even Wordsworth did not wholly succeed in destroying the convention of dividing poetry and prose into distinct categories; prose tended to remain for him a lesser vehicle because it was the instrument of premeditation. In America, Emerson was the main force in destroying this convention. In his 1836 essay "Nature" he speaks, not of prose or poetry, but of inspired "discourse" generally. In addition, he makes such discourse equivalent to vigorous image-making:

> Wise men pierce this rotten diction [i.e., that diction wherein words have lost their direct relation to the images in which they were originally clothed] and fasten words once again to visible things; so that the picturesque language is at once a commanding certificate that he who employs it is in alliance with truth and God. The moment our discourse rises above the ground line of familiar facts and is inflamed with passion or exalted by thought, it clothes itself in images. A man conversing in earnest, if he watch his intellectual processes, will find that a material image more or less luminous arises in his mind, contemporaneous with every thought, which furnishes the vestment of the thought. Hence, good writing and brilliant discourse are perpetual allegories. The imagery is spontaneous. It is the blending of experience with the present action of the mind. It is

> proper creation. It is the working of the Original Cause through the instrument he has already made.[5]

Emerson's journal entries, particularly those dating from the decade of the 1830's, are uniform in their contempt for language which has cast off its imagery. They are uniform as well in their delight in "strong"[6] or "spontaneous"[7] speech. The "maker of a sentence," according to Emerson, "launches out into the infinite & builds a road into Chaos & old Night & is followed by those who hear him with something of wild creative delight."[8]

Thoreau, particularly in his journals, echoes Emerson's championship of spontaneous speech. He writes, for example, in his typically hortatory manner:

> Write while the heat is in you. When the farmer burns a hole in his yoke, he carries the hot iron quickly from the fire to the wood, for every moment is less effectual to penetrate (pierce) it. It must be used instantly, or it is useless. The writer who postpones the recording of his thoughts uses an iron which has cooled to burn a hole with. He cannot inflame the minds of his audience.[9]

And in another entry:

> We cannot write well or truly but what we write with gusto. The body, the senses, must conspire with the mind. Expression is the act of the whole man, that our speech may be vascular. The intellect is powerless to express thought without the aid of heart and liver and every member. Often I feel that my head stands out too dry when it should be immersed. A writer, a man writing, is the scribe of all nature; he is the corn and the grass and the atmosphere writing.[10]

For both Emerson and Thoreau spontaneous writing is a comprehensive act; it is for them the energetic attempt to summon together during the moment of inspiration all their functions, physiological, intellectual, and moral, as if the truth about the world cannot be uttered unless the source of utterance contains the world's complexities. Because they do not make a distinction in kind between the writer and his subject, both Emerson and Thoreau speak about writing in the same hortatory tone as they do about all other conduct; they are moral even towards the act of moralism itself. In this respect, Kerouac is much like them. He cannot talk about writing without moralizing his practice of it. But he goes further still. He creates a

pedagogue's role whereby he can teach the rules of his art. The role is acted most explicitly in two short tracts, "Belief & Technique for Modern Prose" and "Essentials of Spontaneous Prose."[11]

Proponents of spontaneous writing as Emerson, Thoreau, and Kerouac may be, however, they are not interchangeable in this, or any other, respect. What separates Kerouac from Emerson and Thoreau is the place to which he assigns spontaneous writing within the artistic process. For Emerson and Thoreau, spontaneous writing is usually the beginning of what will subsequently become a laborious process of revision, a process in which the initial immediacy of thought is strengthened and clarified. For Kerouac the artistic process is no less laborious, but the labor precedes and accompanies spontaneous writing; spontaneous writing is both the final phase and end-product of mental activity rather than its raw material. Revision is necessary only when the final phase has not been reached before the writing begins. To provide for such a necessity Kerouac introduces, among the other pedagogical injunctions which characterize "Belief," the following exception to his general rule of irreversible spontaneity: "Dont think of words when you stop but to see picture better". The purpose of revision is not to substitute one word for another, but to pursue the original method more vigorously and conscientiously. That is, one should pursue the picture which already exists in one's mind, and one should do so without delay, for otherwise it will recede before one is ready to capture and clothe it in words. Even the picture itself is a kind of clothing, as Emerson asserts in the passage already quoted: "A man conversing in earnest, if he watch his intellectual processes, will find that a material image more or less luminous arises in his mind, contemporaneous with every thought, which furnishes the vestment of the thought." If words are, then, twice removed from "thought," all the more reason to make those words do their tailoring quickly, before their original models disappear and before new models arrive, on which vestments intended for the previous ones cannot fit.

Quick imaginative reflexes are necessary equipment for the artist-tailor of "spontaneous prose." His task is one which requires constant redefinition of his terms, since the models to which he seeks to fit those terms change even as he looks at them. Not only does the artist need such reflexes; the reader needs them too. "Spontaneous prose" is being revised even as we read it; what we experience in the reading is the process of composition — a process to which we need to be alert if we are not to miss the articulation of one image-fitting with the next. If we are alert, we will want to ask questions about the nature of this articulation. According to what logic are the image-fittings joined? By a mere serial logic? Does one image-fitting follow another haphazardly, with the result that no one image-fitting is emphasized? Or do they follow each other in obedience to some intrinsic shaping principle? Is the artist-tailor merely trying on one vestment, discarding it, trying on another in a blur of

pointless activity? Or do the trying-on, the discarding, the trying-on again, themselves describe a pattern larger than each single effort – yet dependent on each single effort for the smooth fitting of the whole?

Questions like these may have troubled Kerouac too. Almost from the beginning of his literary career he was preoccupied with the problem of method, although his first efforts at solving it were not conclusive. Up to and including the publication of his first book, *The Town and the City* in 1950, he composed according to the traditional methods of slow, painstaking revision. But though *The Town and the City* was received favorably both by his friends and by book reviewers, Kerouac was not satisfied that the book represented his own most characteristic ways of thinking. He wanted to invent a method that would allow him to write his next book with a more consistently sustained intensity. The method was suggested to him (on October 25, 1951) by a friend's metaphor, that of "sketching." "Why don't you just sketch in the streets like a painter but with words?" the friend (Ed White) had urged, and Kerouac later told Allen Ginsberg that, if the metaphor is realized, then "everything activates in front of you in myriad profusion." "Sketching" was no mere casual exercise but an active engagement with the object, person, or place sketched. But even so the previous questions must still be asked. *How* is "everything" activated? Are sketches made only to be discarded and forgotten? Are they nullified the moment they are completed? Or does one sketch connect to the next according to some logic of development – a logic that transcends yet depends upon each one of its sketched terms?

Warren Tallman, in a fine essay entitled "Kerouac's Sound," claims that "it is the Bop influence . . . which has been the shaping spirit of [Kerouac's] imagination."[12] What Tallman means by "Bop" is jazz improvisation, the "principle of spontaneous creative freedom . . . that has freed jazz from the tedium of banal melodies."[13] There is much to be said for this view. Kerouac was a great lover of jazz. Many of his finest prose moments were directly inspired by his listening to jazz musicians. And even in his pedagogy Kerouac included terms derived from jazz; the command "Blow as deep as you want to blow" (from "Belief" – the terminology appears also in "Essentials") refers to a jazz musician's "blowing" or improvising on a given theme. Yet Tallman fails to define what he means by "shaping" or by "principle." What he does do, however – and here his service to the understanding of Kerouac's work seems to me great – is to imply by such terms that "spontaneous prose" is *not* anarchic, but that it moves according to a pattern. But what is the pattern?

Fortunately we do not have to rely on guesswork to answer this question, because Kerouac himself eventually supplied some answers.[14] In "Essentials," Kerouac's most vigorous metaphors are derived neither from jazz nor from pictorial art. These metaphors are instead organic. Kerouac evidently felt (as Thoreau must have felt when he defined the writer as

"the corn and the grass and the atmosphere writing") that he had to connect his writing to natural forces rather than to other peculiarly human manifestations of those forces, such as "blowing" or "sketching." The result of his making the connection was that he could now characterize the shape of "spontaneous prose":

> Begin not from preconceived idea of what to say about image but from jewel center of interest in subject of image at *moment* of writing, and write outwards swimming in sea of language to peripheral release and exhaustion — [from "Center of Interest"]
>
> Follow roughly outlines in outfanning movement over subject, as river rock, so mindflow over jewel-center need (run your mind over it, *once*) arriving at pivot, where what was dim-formed "beginning" becomes sharp-necessitating "ending" and language shortens in race to wire of time-race of work, following laws of Deep Form, to conclusion, last words, last trickle — Night is The End. [from "Structure of Work"]

Kerouac's metaphors in "Essentials," whether they are, as here, metaphors of swimming, hydraulics, physics, and running, or whether they are metaphors of respiration (as in "Method") or orgasm (as in "Mental State"), express a common rhythmic pattern, that of expansion, climax, and exhaustion. Kerouac does not claim to be the source of such a pattern; nor does he claim to be the first to discover and analyze it. His achievement consists, not only in being the first to gather these particular metaphors together and to deduce their common pattern, but also in showing how the pattern manifests itself spontaneously in writing.

The pattern requires that the "subject" of writing initiate a movement which necessarily bears the writer farther and farther away from that "subject." Yet the writer always refers to the "subject," even if only implicitly, because it is his first principle of composition. The "subject" acts like the midpoint of an expanding or "outfanning" circular wave. Even though the point itself disappears as the wave-crest moves outwards, it is always implied by the arc of the wave's circumference. I use this geometric metaphor, not only because it helps visualize the process Kerouac is describing, but because it suggests yet another aspect of Kerouac's relation to Emerson, and specifically to the Emerson of "Circles":

> The life of man is a self-evolving circle, which, from a ring imperceptibly small, rushes on all sides outwards to new and larger circles, and that without end. The extent

> to which this generation of circles, wheel without wheel, will go, depends on the force or truth of the individual soul. For it is the inert effort of each thought, having formed itself into a circular wave of circumstance, – as for instance an empire, rules of an art, a local usage, a religious rite, – to heap itself on that ridge and to solidify and hem in the life. But if the soul is quick and strong it bursts over that boundary on all sides and expands another orbit on the great deep, which also runs into a high wave, with attempt again to stop and bind. But the heart refuses to be imprisoned; in its first and narrowest pulses it already tends outward with a vast force and to immense and innumerable expansions.[15]

Kerouac's own "rules of an art" may, at first glance, seem to be "imprisoned" by his emphasis on completion. When he urges his students "*Come* from within, out – to relaxed and said," he seems to imply that experience can and should be contained safely within the past tense. A closer look will show, however, that Kerouac's difference from Emerson is one of emphasis alone. Where Emerson demands that we visualize the continuity of the expansion-process, Kerouac limits his discourse to the single phase, to the reaching of one next-greater circumference. Yet nothing in Kerouac's metaphors suggests that any one such circumference reached is necessarily the last. Breathing does not stop after one breath; a swimmer does not sink after one stroke; one orgasm does not preclude all further desire. Each separate sequence of expansion, climax, and exhaustion is joined to another, similar sequence, whereby an organic logic would not only describe the smallest units of sequences – sentences, paragraphs, individual chapters – but the largest – entire books, perhaps even an entire literary career.[16]

We should be cautious, however, in applying Kerouac's terms from "Essentials" too quickly and simplistically to his writing. Kerouac the pedogogue and Kerouac the student-practitioner are not as closely related as are, for instance, Emerson the pedagogue and Emerson the practitioner. Yet a difference between the two roles is at least implied in Emerson's work. He is hortatory in his own private writings, where the only immediate audience he could have imagined was that student-self who needed the pedagogue's instruction. In Kerouac's work, the student-self is the one who does most of the talking, and it is the pedagogue who is implied or, on occasion, directly characterized, as in "Essentials," in "Belief," and in certain narrative passages. What we need to note about his student-self are the particular ways in which he tries to put in practice his master's injunctions. I have chosen three passages for this purpose. The passages differ in complexity, but in each we can see in

operation the basic logic of "spontaneous prose": an expansion of the perceived environment towards "peripheral release and exhaustion."

Perhaps one of the simplest examples of what Kerouac was able to achieve with "spontaneous prose" is the opening sketch from *Visions of Cody*:

> This is an old diner like the ones Cody and his father ate in, long ago, with that oldfashioned railroad car ceiling and sliding doors — the board where bread is cut is worn down fine as if with bread dust and a plane; the icebox ("Say I got some nice homefries tonight Cody!") is a huge brownwood thing with oldfashioned pull-out handles, windows, tile walls, full of lovely pans of eggs, butter pats, piles of bacon — old lunchcarts always have a dish of sliced raw onions ready to go on hamburgs. Grill is ancient and dark and emits an odor which is really succulent, like you would expect from the black hide of an old ham or an old pastrami beef — The lunchcart has stools with smooth slickwood tops — there are wooden drawers for where you find the long loaves of sandwich bread — The countermen: either Greeks or have big red drink noses. Coffee is served in white porcelain mugs — sometimes brown and cracked. An old pot with a half inch of black fat sits on the grill, with a wire fryer (also caked) sitting in it, ready for french fries — Melted fat is kept warm in an old small white coffee pot. A zinc siding behind the grill gleams from the brush of rags over fat stains — The cash register has a wooden drawer as old as the wood of a rolltop desk. The newest things are the steam cabinet, the aluminum coffee urns, the floor fans — But the marble counter is ancient, cracked, marked, carved, and under it is the old wood counter of late twenties, early thirties, which had come to look like the bottoms of old courtroom benches only with knifemarks and scars and something suggesting decades of delicious greasy food. Ah!
>
> The smell is always of boiling water mixed with beef, boiling beef, like the smell of the great kitchens of parochial boarding schools or old hospitals, the brown basement kitchens' smell — the smell is curiously the hungriest in America — it is FOODY instead of just spicy, or — it's like dishwater soap just washed a pan of hamburg — nameless — memoried — sincere — makes the guts of men curl in October.[17]

The logic of this energetic, sensuous prose is determined, up to the climax represented by the satisfied "Ah!," by the movement of the sketcher's eye as it inhabits one object in the diner after another. That eye imposes no subordination on the objects it lovingly occupies; the countermen are noted with the same excited specificity as are the grill and the fat-pot. When there are extensions to objects (like the courtroom benches) outside the directly observed world of the diner, these objects are sketched with the same care as those within it. The mind's eye (what Kerouac calls, in "Belief," the "eye within the eye") increases the range of the physical eye, spreads the visual horizon over larger areas of space and time, but it functions no differently. The worlds of mind and matter are viewed with an equal degree of fascination and delight.

Yet the eye is not an organ of perception isolated from the others. The "Ah!" represents a climax of the palate too. What's more, the eye and the palate, having exhausted their range, yield to the nose, which is the principle organ of perception in the succeeding paragraph. The language of this paragraph "shortens," because of the increasing frequency of "space-dashes" (from "Scoping"). Yet so wide has the eye spread its range in the paragraph before that even in the "release" phase of "spontaneous prose," the nose, taking advantage of the eye's achievement, universalizes its sensations. The sense of smell, thus enhanced, seems to enclose, not only the totality of sensations which diners can occasion, but "America" as well.

In the second example I have chosen, again from *Visions of Cody*, the relation between the expanding environment and the narrator-expander is more complicated:

> So I sit in Jamaica, Long Island in the night, thinking of Cody and the road – happens to be a fog – distant low of a klaxon moaning horn – sudden swash of locomotive steam, either that or crash of steel rods – a car washing by with the sound we all know from city dawns – reminds me of Cambridge, Mass. at dawn and I didn't go to Harvard – Far far away a nameless purling or yowling of some kind done either by (raised, vibroned) a train on a steel curve or skidding car – grumble of a truck coming – small truck, but has whistle tires in the mist – a double "bop bop" or "beep beep" from railyards, maybe soft application of big Diesel whistle by engineer to acknowledge hiball-on-the-air from brakeman or car knocker – the sound of the whole thing in general when there are no specific near-sounds is of course sea-like but also almost like the sound of the living structure, so as you look at a house you imagine it is adding its breathing to the general loud hush – (ever so far, in the